

**Evaluation of Hiring Procedures and
Identification of Preferred Character Traits
In Ohio Fire Department Employment Candidates**

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that the following statements are true:

1. This paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

2. I have affirmed the use of proper spelling and grammar in this document by using the spell and grammar check functions of a word processing software program and correcting the errors as suggested by the program.

Signed: _____

Printed Name: Edward J. Robertson

ABSTRACT

Most fire departments consider the ability to assess the qualities of an individual prior to hiring them a priority, but continue to deal with problem employees because they are not achieving the best results possible from their hiring process.

This evaluative study examined current hiring practices and identified particular traits and characteristics Ohio fire chiefs and executive officers value in potential employment candidates, and whether a testing instrument identifying those traits would be of value to Ohio fire service organizations.

A questionnaire was used to prioritize characteristics that fire executives believe are necessary for candidates to become successful and productive fire fighters.

The study identified desirable traits and offers guidance in the hiring process as well as identifying useful examination and interviewing procedures.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT	2
ABSTRACT.....	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	4
INTRODUCTION	5
Statement of the Problem.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	5
Research Questions.....	6
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE.....	7
LITERATURE REVIEW	9
PROCEDURES.....	12
Limitations of the Study.....	13
RESULTS	14
DISCUSSION.....	19
RECOMMENDATIONS	22
REFERENCES	24
APPENDIX 1 – Cover Letter and Questionnaire	26

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Hiring of inappropriate personnel in the fire service can be costly, time consuming and frustrating. The North Olmsted Fire Department has hired approximately thirty firefighter/ paramedics in the last fifteen years. The majority of these employees have shown that they value the organization and recognize and support the organizations goals and objectives. A few however have become problematic in the respect that they see the organization as a means to a self-centered personal end. These problematic employees require exceptional amounts of time from the administration, negatively impact the morale of the work force, and are not easily disciplined due to protection of collective bargaining agreements and Civil Service Rules and Regulations.

Understanding that these difficult employees have a significant negative impact on the effectiveness and morale of the department, it becomes evident that hiring exceptional employees will help alleviate personnel problems and could greatly improve the productiveness and decrease costs of operation of the organization.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the hiring processes used by Ohio fire departments and to insure that we are identifying appropriate candidates that will benefit their organizations throughout their careers. Using evaluative research, previous hiring successes and/or failures are examined and positive personality traits are identified. Increased awareness of hiring problems and identification of improved methods of hiring

could significantly impact the Ohio fire service by improving its most valuable resource – its people.

Research Questions

The following questions will be answered by this evaluative research:

1. Do fire chiefs and administrative officers believe that identifying specific positive personality traits in employment candidates is important to their individual organizations?
2. What testing methods and procedures are currently used by Ohio fire service organizations during the hiring process?
3. Do fire chiefs and fire service administrators feel that the procedures that they currently use in the hiring process are effective?
4. If improved hiring practices and procedures were identified would fire service officials be open to changing their current methods of hiring?
5. What specific personality traits and attributes do fire service officials identify as positive and valuable for a candidate to become a successful and productive member of the fire service?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

During the hiring process for the last thirty North Olmsted firefighter/ paramedics there have been many inconsistencies. Some candidates were hired by a committee of officers while some were hired by the Chief and Assistant Chief. Three different department administrations were involved in these processes with no written standards or procedures beyond the Civil Service Regulations for testing of new candidates. The Civil Service process requires written testing and a minimum physical agility standard but does not require identification of specific personality traits or deficiencies. While Civil Service does allow for psychiatric testing as well as criminal background investigations this information was not considered sufficiently by the department administrators making the hiring decisions. The application and testing requirements from candidate to candidate have been inconsistent. Of the group that was hired the vast majority have been good employees that have valued there positions and the organization. A minority though has proven to be problematic. They consistently challenge the organization and put their own desires and goals before those of the group.

If these potential problems could be identified prior to employment the department could avoid costly and time consuming personnel issues. The ability to identify specific positive qualities in potential firefighters could significantly improve the performance and morale of all department personnel.

The collective bargaining agreement allows for an eighteen month probationary period after which an employee is protected by the contract. Once a problematic employee is allowed to complete the probationary period the ability to terminate becomes

greatly reduced. The process of a lengthy disciplinary process of a problematic employee also has significant negative impact on the entire workforce.

The ability to identify appropriate candidates prior to them even entering the probationary period would greatly reduce the supervision and remediation hours spent by shift officers and chiefs. The decreased need for disciplinary action would reduce the negative impact on morale and reduce the potential for significant legal fees in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While little research specific to fire service hiring practices was found, significant information related to police department hiring and volumes regarding private sector hiring is available. Hiring in the fire service is so significantly influenced by the nature of the job requirements, limitations in hiring practices and extreme difficulty dismissing problematic employees, that private sector studies frequently are not valid. Few if any private sector jobs require the employees to eat and sleep together for twenty-four hour shifts. Often private sector performance is based solely on tangible evaluation of productivity and completely ignores relational abilities among the employees. In an attempt to relate information specifically to the fire service, hiring related research based on private sector standards was discounted.

The law enforcement community also lacks many of the relational factors related to co-habitation but does place value on relational abilities between police officers and the public. The law enforcement profession is also governed by the same collective bargaining and civil service limitations as the fire service, making law enforcement research more valuable.

Butcher (2004) describes the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) as an instrument used to measure personality traits through a battery of 567 true/false questions. Profiles generated from the test instrument are available specifically oriented toward firefighter/paramedic employment candidates.

Detrick, Chibnall, & Rosso (2001) compared results of the MMPI-2 and the Inwald Personality Inventory (IPI), an established police officer screening instrument, in order to validate the results of the MMPI-2. The MMPI-2 and IPI were administered to

467 police officer applicants. The study found that pre-employment psychological assessment of applicants is recognized as a necessary part of the hiring process by most police departments and that the use of the MMPI-2 in the evaluation for police officer applicants is common. Their findings show that MMPI-2 profiles indicating psychopathology were shown to predict serious performance problems for police officers, while a conventional response predicted low probability of these difficulties.

Rector & Kleiner (2002) examined productivity in public institutions and found that there is greater difficulty disciplining public employees than private because employees in the public sector have the protection of organized labor and believe that if they are not terminated in the probationary period that termination becomes almost impossible. They also state that motivational tools used in private industry are not available in the public sector because compensation is not tied to performance.

Schmidt & Hunter (1998) look at the validity of 19 different selection procedures for both initial hiring and promotions. They state that the most important value of any personnel assessment method is its ability to predict future job performance. They go on to show that general mental ability testing along with integrity evaluation and structured interviewing are significantly more reliable predictors of future job performance than traditional evaluation procedures.

Johnson (1995) addresses the hiring process and discusses proper selection, training and promotion of fire fighters. He discusses various examination and interview procedures and their individual strengths and weaknesses. The author believes that “Few things are as critical to an organization as the selection of new employees”.

Booth (1999) reviews a national survey that was conducted to gather information on selection requirements and testing methods for entry level hiring. 115 Departments across the nation were surveyed regarding their use of specific procedures for hiring and their attitudes and opinions regarding the hiring process.

Avillo (2001) discusses the importance of managing probationary fire fighters and the importance of preparation prior to the commencement of the probationary period. He also deals with disciplinary concerns and the significant impact caused throughout the organization by negative discipline of personnel. He finishes by outlining recommendations for probationary instruction, examination and monitoring of probationary candidates.

Ones, Viswesvaran & Schmidt (1993) researched the validity of integrity tests and found that they were useful as predictors of job performance and future counter-productive behaviors on the job.

Maxwell & Arvey (1993) examine the relationship between the validity of personality tests and adverse impact on the hiring process. They concluded that effort to improve the predictability of future job performance does not necessarily elevate the incidence of negative impact as believed, and may actually reduce it.

PROCEDURES

In order to obtain information relative to current hiring practices and valued character traits a survey was developed to be distributed to fire departments throughout the state.

A focus group of North Olmsted Fire Department officers was formed to discuss character traits of fire fighters. The group consisted of the Fire Chief, two Captains that had been involved in previous hiring of fire fighters and two firefighters. Each was asked individually to think of a fire fighter, without identifying that person that they perceived as an exceptional employee and then list five personality or character traits that made that individual exceptional. They were then asked to think of a problematic fire fighter, again without identifying that person, and identify the personality traits that they perceived were negative in that individual.

There responses were recorded and developed into a list of positive and negative traits. Antonyms of negative responses were then used to avoid bias by respondents to negative terms. The list was then reviewed by the group and additional traits that had not previously been mentioned were discussed. A list of forty-nine potential traits was created for distribution as part of the finished survey.

Discussion was also had regarding the sample selection size and potential survey respondents. Past experience in hiring, current hiring practices, department makeup, municipality size and civil service constraints were determined to be of value when correlating the data and were incorporated into the survey (see appendix 1). Respondents were also asked to rate their satisfaction with their current hiring practices and their likelihood of changing those practices if provided improved procedures.

The survey with cover letter was mailed to 364 Ohio fire departments that were determined to employ full-time and/or part-time employees by the State Fire Marshall's office. Wholly volunteer departments were excluded from the survey due to the fact that they did not typically require significant, if any, examination of fire fighter candidates before acceptance into the organization.

Included in the mailing was a cover letter briefly explaining the project, the survey form and a stamped return envelope. Responses were received from 231 departments that employed full time or part time employees. 12 responses were received from departments that characterized themselves as volunteer. 121 departments did not respond.

Limitations of the Study

Some concern about the actual makeup of an individual department's staff regarding the number of full time versus part time fire fighters was realized while tabulating returned surveys. While an attempt to determine the respondents experience with the hiring process was made by asking the number of candidates that they had been integrally involved in hiring, a possibility remains that a respondent has not been involved in hiring full time or part time employees if they are employed by a combination department that also utilizes volunteer firefighters.

Individual bias may come into play in response to the specific personality traits portion of the survey. Terms were not defined, leaving responses open to some interpretation. Also some terms that were very close in meaning may have diluted the response to a particular character trait, potentially leading to a false result (ex. honest, integrity, ethical...).

RESULTS

Surveys were returned by 243 departments of a total possible 364 surveys mailed resulting in a 66.8% response rate. A number of the surveys were not completely answered in all fields resulting in differing total responses for each section of the survey. These differences are noted in respective tables.

Of the 243 respondents, 12 (4.9%) were volunteer departments and were not included in survey totals. The remaining 231 respondents indicated that their department could be characterized as career, combination or part time (see Table 1).

Table 1

Department Type^a

Department Type	N	%
Full Time	85	37%
Combination	138	60%
Part Time	8	3%
Total	231	100%

^a 231 Total Respondents

Respondent departments indicated populations ranging from below 5000 to 50,000 – 100,000. No respondents indicated populations in excess of 100,000 residents (see Table 2).

Table 2

Population of Municipalities Represented in Survey Responses^a

Population	N	%
< 5K	20	9%
5K-10K	42	18%
10K-15K	46	20%
15K-25K	59	26%
25K-50K	45	20%
50K-100K	16	7%
>100K	0	
Total	228	100%

^a 228 Total respondents

The majority of respondents have significant experience with the hiring process in the past with 72% having hired or been involved in the process of hiring at least ten fire fighters (see Table 3) and 78% have been involved in the termination of an employee. Civil service regulations influence the hiring process in 54% of respondent's municipalities.

Table 3

Number of Fire Fighters Hired^a

Fire Fighters Hired	N	%
1	2	1%
2 to 3	6	3%
4 to 6	24	11%
6 to 10	30	13%
10 to 20	40	18%
> 20	122	54%
Total	224	100%

^a 224 of 231 respondents answered

Respondents strongly agreed that identifying specific personality traits and characteristics in candidates prior to hiring them had a significant impact on the success of their organization, with an average 8.4 on a 1 to 10 scale.

72% of respondents indicated that they felt their current pre-employment and interviewing process appropriately identified the best fire fighter candidates, yet said they were very likely to change to improved testing procedures if they were better able to identify specific positive characteristics in fire fighter candidates with an average response of 7.3 on a 1 to 10 scale.

Current hiring practices exercised by respondent departments ranged widely. The most consistently used procedure for entry level candidate evaluation is a criminal background investigation followed by oral interviewing of the candidate. Medical

examinations by a physician as well as physical agility testing were also commonly used as assessment tools. 9% of respondents indicated that they used other procedures that were not listed and identified those as driving record examination and home visits by a chief or senior officer (see Table 4)

Table 4

Current Hiring Practices^a

Procedure	N	%
Criminal Background Investigation	213	94%
Oral Interview	206	91%
Personal / Professional References	187	82%
Physical Agility Testing	187	82%
Written Exam	179	79%
Medical Physical Exam	190	84%
Specialized Medical Exam	147	65%
Psychological Exam	114	50%
Polygraph Testing	90	40%
Credit History Check	77	34%
Oral Exam	49	22%
Assessment Center	37	16%
Job Related Skills Testing	37	16%
Other	21	9%

^a 228 of 231 Respondents

Respondents were asked to review a list of characteristics and choose ten that they believed were most important for a candidate to possess in order to become a successful and productive member of the fire service and rate them on a 1 to 10 scale (see Table 5).

Table 5*Desirable Characteristics and Traits^a*

	Frequency of Responses	Rated Values	Weighted ^b Values
Work Ethic	127	880	54.78
Responsible	129	686	43.38
Honest	105	835	42.98
Physically Fit	126	665	41.07
Teamwork	113	624	34.56
Reliable	104	562	28.65
Motivated	97	575	27.34
Trustworthy	81	544	21.60
Ethical	79	509	19.71
Positive	86	462	19.48
Integrity	66	507	16.40
Competent	72	400	14.12
Knowledgeable	70	409	14.03
Conscientious	71	330	11.49
Confident	58	291	8.27
Committed	51	299	7.48
Caring	55	248	6.69
Loyal	51	256	6.40
Courteous	44	176	3.80
Progressive	41	176	3.54
Leader	30	147	2.16
Friendly	32	112	1.76
Decisive	28	123	1.69
Capable	19	116	1.08
Family	20	106	1.04
Empathetic	20	98	0.96
Thoughtful	16	72	0.56
Kind	12	76	0.45
Clean	18	49	0.43
Efficient	14	54	0.37
Controlled	14	53	0.36
Neat	14	53	0.36
Creative	14	51	0.35
Passionate	10	66	0.32
Effective	10	58	0.28
Humble	11	47	0.25
Obedient	12	43	0.25
Fair	10	50	0.25
Courageous	12	40	0.24
Helpful	13	35	0.22
Selfless	9	47	0.21
Orderly	9	31	0.14
Articulate	7	32	0.11
Achiever	8	27	0.11
Cheerful	7	22	0.08
Independent	5	27	0.07
Brave	4	33	0.06
Humorous	6	8	0.02
Thrifty	0	0	0.00
Total	2010	11110	

^a 204 Of 231 Respondents answered^b Weighted Value = (Rated Value / Maximum Value (2010) x Frequency)

Responses to the characteristics and traits component of the survey varied greatly. The total number of responses ranged from zero to 127 for a single characteristic with maximum values of 10 on a 1 to 10 scale in 25 of 49 possible choices. Rated value totals ranged from zero points to 880 points. Weighted values were calculated by dividing the rated value by the total possible value of 2010 points to establish a multiplier. That factor was then multiplied by the frequency of response to establish a prioritization of traits and characteristics.

The resulting is a prioritized list of traits that could be identified in the examination and interviewing process for potential fire fighter candidates.

DISCUSSION

Johnson states that few things are as critical to an organization as the selection of new employees. This study showed that Ohio fire executives agree and feel that the ability to hire the best possible people can significantly impact the success of an organization and that seventy two percent of the respondents felt that their current hiring process appropriately identified the best candidates.

Inversely 78 % of Ohio fire executives have been involved in the termination of an employee and the majority strongly agree that they would be likely to change to improved testing procedures that would identify specific positive characteristics in fire fighter candidates. The study shows that hiring processes throughout the state vary greatly and the same variations in hiring practices are seen nationally (Booth).

The recognition that it is difficult to terminate employees who last through their probationary period in organizations that are governed by civil service regulations (Rector) coupled with the fact that the majority of Ohio fire departments are constrained by these regulations elevates the need to insure proper screening of employment candidates.

Proper identification of qualified candidates through the use of comprehensive examination and interview procedures will increase the chances of properly identifying good candidates and decrease the incidence of disciplinary action and termination of employees.

The availability of testing instruments such as the MMPI-2 (Detrick) and their proven ability to predict future job performance specific to firefighter/ paramedic careers (Butcher) is their most important value (Schmidt). With the proven validity of integrity

testing (Ones), especially when coupled with general mental ability tests (Schmidt), and a defined outline of personality traits that have been determined to be important to a candidate's success and productivity within the fire service, employers will be able to greatly improve their likelihood of selecting candidates that will be successful in the fire service.

While the North Olmsted Fire Department currently uses most of the same examination tools and procedures as identified in table 4, not enough focus is placed on identifying specific character traits that would identify the best candidate. More time and effort toward evaluation and application of psychological exam results and following up with references and previous employers would incorporate identification of specific positive traits into the judgment of candidates.

Appropriate use of identified workplace behaviors from the MMPI 2 as opposed to a simple pass / fail indication from the examiner as well as thorough examination of previous workplace attitudes can indicate future probability of success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In an attempt to assure that candidates meet desired character profiles before hiring, application of recognized personality and psychological testing in addition to physical testing and varied interview procedures should be a priority for all fire departments.

Knowing that statewide fire department administrators have recognized the need to identify the best possible candidates during the hiring process and knowing what specific traits and characteristics are most desirable, a profile of an appropriate candidate can be developed before the hiring process begins. Information from the identified testing procedures can be used to obtain sufficient information to match candidates as closely as possible to the determined profile.

In advance of the hiring process a relationship between the department administrators and Civil Service members should be developed and the hiring process reviewed to reflect the needs of the position being filled and the fire administrators desire to avoid future personnel problems by adjusting the hiring process and procedures.

Specific traits and characteristics that are desired as well as the process to determine these traits should be shared with all parties and interviewers involved in the hiring process in order to further insure an unbiased hiring process that is efficient and effective.

These specific recommendations will help the North Olmsted Fire Department significantly improve it's likelihood of success in the hiring process by identifying firefighters that will be successful in the future.

Above all else focus must be maintained on impartially identifying the candidate that best meets the pre-determined desired profile.

Additional research into the use of the probationary period for additional evaluation of new hires (Aவில்) could be of value.

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APPENDIX 1 – COVER LETTER AND QUESTIONNAIRE

April 28, 2004

To whom it may concern:

Enclosed is a short survey that is being used to research desirable characteristics and personality traits in potential candidates for hire in the fire service. This information is being gathered and analyzed as part of a research project for the Ohio Fire Executive Program offered by the Ohio Fire Chiefs Association. The goal of the project is to define the most desirable qualities in potential hires and identify test instruments or procedures that would in turn identify candidates that demonstrate these desirable qualities.

The survey is being sent to Chief and Executive Officers throughout the state of Ohio. Enclosed is a stamped envelope in which to return the survey. Please take a moment to respond. If you would like information from the survey and the completed research please complete the information form that accompanies the survey. Please do not identify yourself or your department on the survey form.

Thank you in advance for your assistance,

Edward J. Robertson
Assistant Fire Chief
North Olmsted Fire Department

Questionnaire

1. How would you best characterize your fire department (check only one)?
Career_____ Combination_____ Part Time_____ Volunteer_____

2. Which option best describes the population of the community you serve (check only one)?

Less than 5,000_____ 5,000-10,000_____ 10,000-15,000_____
15,000-25,000_____ 25,000-50,000_____ 50,000-100,000_____
over 100,000 _____

3. During your career in the fire service how many candidates have you either hired or been integrally involved in the hiring process of?

1_____ 2-3_____ 4-6_____ 6-10_____ 10-20_____ more than 20_____

4. During your career in the fire service, have you ever terminated or been part of the termination process of an employee? Yes_____ No_____

5. Is the hiring process in your community governed by civil service regulations?
Yes_____ No_____

6. Identifying specific personality traits and characteristics in candidates prior to hiring them has a significant impact on the success of my organization?

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree
1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9 ----- 10

7. Please indicate the following testing instruments or procedures you currently use in the hiring process for firefighters (check as many as apply).

- _____ Written Exam
- _____ Oral Interview
- _____ Oral Exam (Using a point scoring system)
- _____ Assessment Center
- _____ Physical Agility Testing
- _____ Criminal Background Investigation
- _____ Polygraph Testing
- _____ Medical Physical Exam (General)
- _____ Specialized Medical Exam (Eye Exam, Hearing Screening, Etc.)
- _____ Psychological Exam
- _____ Job Related Skills Testing
- _____ Credit History Check
- _____ Personal and/or Professional References
- _____ Other : _____

Explain:

8. Do you feel that your current pre-employment testing/interviewing process appropriately identifies the best possible firefighter candidates?

Yes _____ No _____

9. How likely would you be to change to improved testing procedures that are able to identify specific positive characteristics in firefighter candidates?

Not likely Very Likely

1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9 ----- 10

Thoroughly review the following list of potential characteristics of a fire fighter candidate. Then, **choose ten** from the list that you believe are the most important characteristics or qualities for a candidate to possess in order to become a successful and productive member of the fire service. This may be challenging because most of the terms listed are generally positive and desirable characteristics, so take your time and pick only your **top** 10 choices. It may help to consider these traits in relation to fire fighters that you know. Then, rank your choices from most important to least important by placing numerals in front them (1 to 10). The number 1 indicates the most important; the number 10 indicates the least important.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Creative | <input type="checkbox"/> Confident |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Positive | <input type="checkbox"/> Family Oriented |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Controlled | <input type="checkbox"/> Courteous |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Neat | <input type="checkbox"/> Obedient |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Orderly | <input type="checkbox"/> Decisive |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clean | <input type="checkbox"/> Articulate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Empathetic | <input type="checkbox"/> Honest |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Caring | <input type="checkbox"/> Integrity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kind | <input type="checkbox"/> Ethical |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friendly | <input type="checkbox"/> Trustworthy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Helpful | <input type="checkbox"/> Fair |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thoughtful | <input type="checkbox"/> Good Work Ethic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Humble | <input type="checkbox"/> Achiever |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Progressive | <input type="checkbox"/> Passionate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leader | <input type="checkbox"/> Motivated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thrifty | <input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Independent | <input type="checkbox"/> Committed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Responsible | <input type="checkbox"/> Loyal |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conscientious | <input type="checkbox"/> Selfless |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Courageous | <input type="checkbox"/> Knowledgeable |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brave | <input type="checkbox"/> Capable |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Humorous | <input type="checkbox"/> Competent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cheerful | <input type="checkbox"/> Physically Fit |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Effective | <input type="checkbox"/> Efficient |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reliable | |